

The Assange case and the working class

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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is again awaiting a ruling by the UK courts over his extradition to the United States. After a two-day hearing during which his legal team sought leave to appeal before the High Court, judges Mr Justice Johnson and Dame Victoria Sharp reserved their decision. They are not expected to announce until after March 4, the deadline for the submission of additional documents by lawyers.

If they grant leave, Assange will face a further wait in Belmarsh maximum security prison until the appeal is held and a final decision reached.

If they refuse, two courses are possible. Assange will immediately appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, including for a Rule 39 order to block his extradition until the court in Strasbourg reaches its own decision. Assuming this is granted, it will be up to the UK government to decide whether to observe the order, or to transfer Assange to the US regardless.

All eventualities are technically and politically possible. The British ruling class has played a vital role as US imperialism's jailer, keeping Assange confined for nearly 12 years, first in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, placed under continuous siege by police, then in Belmarsh. It could continue doing so while granting him a High Court appeal, which could still ultimately be refused, or allowing an appeal to proceed through the European Court.

Alternatively, the British and American states may have decided that the time has come to ship Assange to the US. Such a plan would have been complicated by the strong case mounted this week, but certainly not ruled out.

Extradition would place further enormous personal and legal challenges before Assange. He has suffered enormous personal harm during his incarceration in Britain, both physically and psychologically, and was too ill to attend or even watch the High Court hearing by video link. Assange has been judged a suicide risk should he be sent to the US, and his wife, Stella, has insisted he would not survive.

In Assange's initial extradition hearing in the autumn of

2021, expert witnesses testified to the draconian conditions of his pretrial imprisonment in the US.

According to their evidence, he would likely be placed in the administrative segregation unit of the Alexandria Detention Center and subject to special administrative measures, which, combined, would lead to his almost total isolation and severely handicap his ability to participate in his own legal defence.

The barbaric treatment that awaits him has been demonstrated by the handling of Joshua Schulte, recently sentenced to 40 years imprisonment for leaking evidence of CIA spy software. Schulte told his sentencing hearing, "The US Federal government tortures me with 24/7 white noise and solitary confinement. The window is blacked out. When I am offered access to the law library, I have to urinate and defecate on the floor. I am left there for 9 hours.

"I have been locked in my torture cage with rodent excrement. Ice accumulates near the window. I wash my clothes in my toilet. I'm forced to eat with my bare hands like an animal. They look down on you like you are not human."

Assange's lawyers will also suffer restrictions. Besides having limited access to their client, they will have hurdles placed in their way accessing US government materials relevant to his defence and sharing their details with Assange.

Meanwhile, all WikiLeaks staff have been warned against travelling in the US for fear of persecution.

At trial, the fact that the Espionage Act contains no public interests defence will leave it open to the prosecution to shout down any attempt to present evidence about the actual content of the WikiLeaks releases, about the public's rights to know or about Assange's motivation for acting as he did. The Classified Information Procedures Act will allow the government and intelligence agencies every opportunity to interfere with what evidence his lawyers are formally allowed to present.

Medical witnesses at Assange's extradition hearing also

testified to the real risk of suicide in the event of extradition and imprisonment under these conditions, and the appalling state of mental health care provided by US prisons. That evidence was accepted by the judge as a basis for an initial decision against extradition. It was only overturned based on “assurances” from the US government so conditional that they are not worth the paper they are written on.

Moreover, there is a real threat that Assange will have to endure these conditions under threat of execution. As his lawyers explained in this week’s hearing, the offences he is charged with, already carrying a 175-year sentence, can be recharged as capital offences. None of the usual assurances that the death penalty will not be imposed have been given.

The “suicide” of Jeffrey Epstein after just a month of imprisonment and ahead of his expected exposure of crimes at the highest levels of American society looms large.

Assange’s legal case has very carefully and effectively exposed these kangaroo court proceedings, along with abuse of Assange’s legal rights by the US-UK conspiracy and the chilling precedent the US government is trying to set by seizing and seeking to disappear a foreign journalist under the Espionage Act. But whether his case is continued in the UK before the High Court, in Strasbourg before the European Court, or in the United States, the struggle to free Assange can only succeed as one aspect of a mass political campaign.

Such a movement can and must be built. The forces arrayed against Assange by the UK and US states are powerful. But there is another, even more formidable force which has yet to have its say—the British, American and international working class.

In a Perspective column published after Assange’s main hearing two-and-a-half years ago, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained:

Through the Assange case, workers have been given an object lesson in imperialism—a system of violence and repression perpetrated against the world’s people by the most powerful states and their adjuncts on behalf of the ruling financial oligarchy.

Since then, the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza have provided new lessons in

imperialist violence. Opposition to Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians, carried out with the full support of the US, Britain and other imperialist powers, has brought millions onto the streets around the world, while the war in Ukraine is driving a rapid expansion of military spending, enflaming already acute social tensions. The ruling class is responding with increasingly dictatorial laws and police repression.

Referring to moves in this direction already in 2021, the Perspective predicted:

These actions cannot be taken without prompting mass resistance in the American and world working class. As that movement becomes conscious, through its education by the revolutionary party, that it is engaged in a life-or-death fight with decaying capitalism and imperialism, it will come to recognise the campaign to free Assange as an essential part of that struggle.

This is the conception which must guide the urgent work necessary to build the mass movement needed to free Assange. His case in the courts is unanswerable except through anti-democratic and unfair rulings arrived at in the interests of the ruling class in Britain and the US. Defeating these forces requires more than legal arguments. It demands the mobilisation of workers and the younger generation worldwide against dictatorship and war and in defence of someone viewed by hundreds of millions as a hero for his exposure of war crimes—for which the guilty are trying to silence him forever.



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